

Minutes of the Human Rights Commission meeting
March 17, 2022

Present: Booker Bush, Deidre Cuffee-Gray, Megan Paik, Wren Bellavance-Grace

Absent: Susan McDonald-Bolanos, Kathy Wicks

Guests: Wendy Goodman and Mpress Bennu of Greenfield Human Rights Commission;
Karen Foster, Vice President of Northampton City Council and Ward 2 Councilor

Meeting was called to order at 6:38 p.m. There was no public comment.

Wendy Goodman and Mpress Bennu introduced themselves and expressed the interest they share with Northampton in diversifying their boards and commissions.

Councilor Foster gave an update on the development of the “Select Committee to Study Barriers to Service on Boards and Commissions,” which was the charge of a council resolution approved in February. A lot of discussion about compensation started when Northampton’s policing review commission was formed. However, the Council wanted to go broader because more representation and participation in government is the goal, beyond procedures or compensation that would be specific for committees. The broad task of the select committee is to identify barriers that prevent people from serving and begin addressing what to do about those barriers.

One barrier already identified is providing stipends to commissioners/board members, which would add them to the city payroll; the potential of 128 new employees would open up new conflict of interest issues. The select committee would be able to delve into such issues in a meaty way. The Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) has a grant and project called Redesigning Power Structures that addresses determinants of inequities and structural racism by intervening in levels of governance and decision-making. CES staff have been a tremendous resource to the councilors; they have suggested applying through a phone call in lieu of a written statement, making the process meaningful to more people. The resolution stipulated that the committee reports back to the city council in October, but there is no urgency to meet a deadline.

Commissioner Paik asked about how the sponsors intend to conduct outreach about the open committee positions, especially for those groups who have not previously served and/or are underrepresented in city government. Councilor Foster reiterated that the new committee will be comprised of two city officials, three currently serving on commissions/boards, and two who are not currently/have never served. Those who have never served may be facing the most barriers to serving. The application will be in the Gazette, Councilor Foster will visit various committee meetings, and Councilor Nash will drop off applications at Salvo House and other public housing. The makeup of committee cannot be skewed toward those who have never served, but

the select committee needs to creatively find ways to amplify those voices. Word of mouth and the efforts of the current board chairs will be key.

Wendy Goodman asked if Councilors Foster and Nash conceptualized the committee. The idea for the committee has percolated through many entities, but they did sponsor the resolution. One challenge is finding staff, which cannot be the administrative assistant of the Council. But some remaining Covid funds from unused Council travel may be deployed for administrative support of this committee. Wendy said that Greenfield Human Rights Commission would like to see the language of the resolution and requested that Councilor Foster present at one of their meetings.

Commissioner Booker mentioned that three original members of the policing review commission resigned. Two were women of color who had unmet needs for childcare during the meetings. The white member left because she felt unheard on the commission. Councilor Foster remarked that committee culture is another subject for discussion by the select committee. Commissioner Booker said that new and younger voices are difficult to bring into these spaces, and there is a need to identify their barriers. Commissioner Cuffey-Gray asked if other Massachusetts municipalities have done this successfully. Commissioner Paik asked if the select committee could define what would constitute “diversity” on volunteer boards and whether there was interest from a current HRC member in serving on the select committee with ongoing support from other commissioners. The discussion to identify a representative from HRC can recur when the committee’s application is publicly available. As a starting point, she would like the select committee to collect and analyze demographic data and query individual commissions about their processes of recruitment, onboarding, and leadership. Councilor Foster said that the Council’s City Services committee had decided to take a census in February 2020 but was deterred by the pandemic. There have been discussions on how that data is to be collected, whether through reviewing gender, age, and race from applications of current members or by surveying the chairs of boards. The CES’s grant could help with that data collection. The Arts Council, for instance, has seen younger applicants as well as applicants of color, and the Housing Partnership has recruited more diversity as well. But it is difficult to know if we can make improvements until we know “where we are,” which is probably older, whiter, and more cisgender and straighter than what we aspire to be. Adding questions about socioeconomic status to the application could also be helpful.

Commissioner Bush mentioned that remote meetings allowed him to be more involved on both the city and state levels. His volunteer boards have actually added diversification during the pandemic. He encouraged members to lobby for maintaining remote access to government meetings. Commissioners mentioned the significant barriers of meetings during work hours and evenings as well as uneven access to internet access.

Commissioners discussed their preferences for meeting format and voted to follow the City Council's decisions. Commissioner Bellavance-Grace mentioned that remote meetings will always exclude residents who do not have internet; Commissioner Cuffey-Gray suggested creating access to city meetings through a library kiosk. Anonymity was an issue on the policing review commission which wanted to solicit comments from underrepresented voices.

Wendy and Mpress expressed their appreciation for inclusion in the meeting.

Minutes were approved by members with the abstention of Commissioner Bellavance-Grace, who was absent in February. The remaining discussion items will be moved to April's agenda.

Commissioner Bush moved to adjourn and was seconded by Commissioner Paik. Meeting ended at 7:17 p.m.